

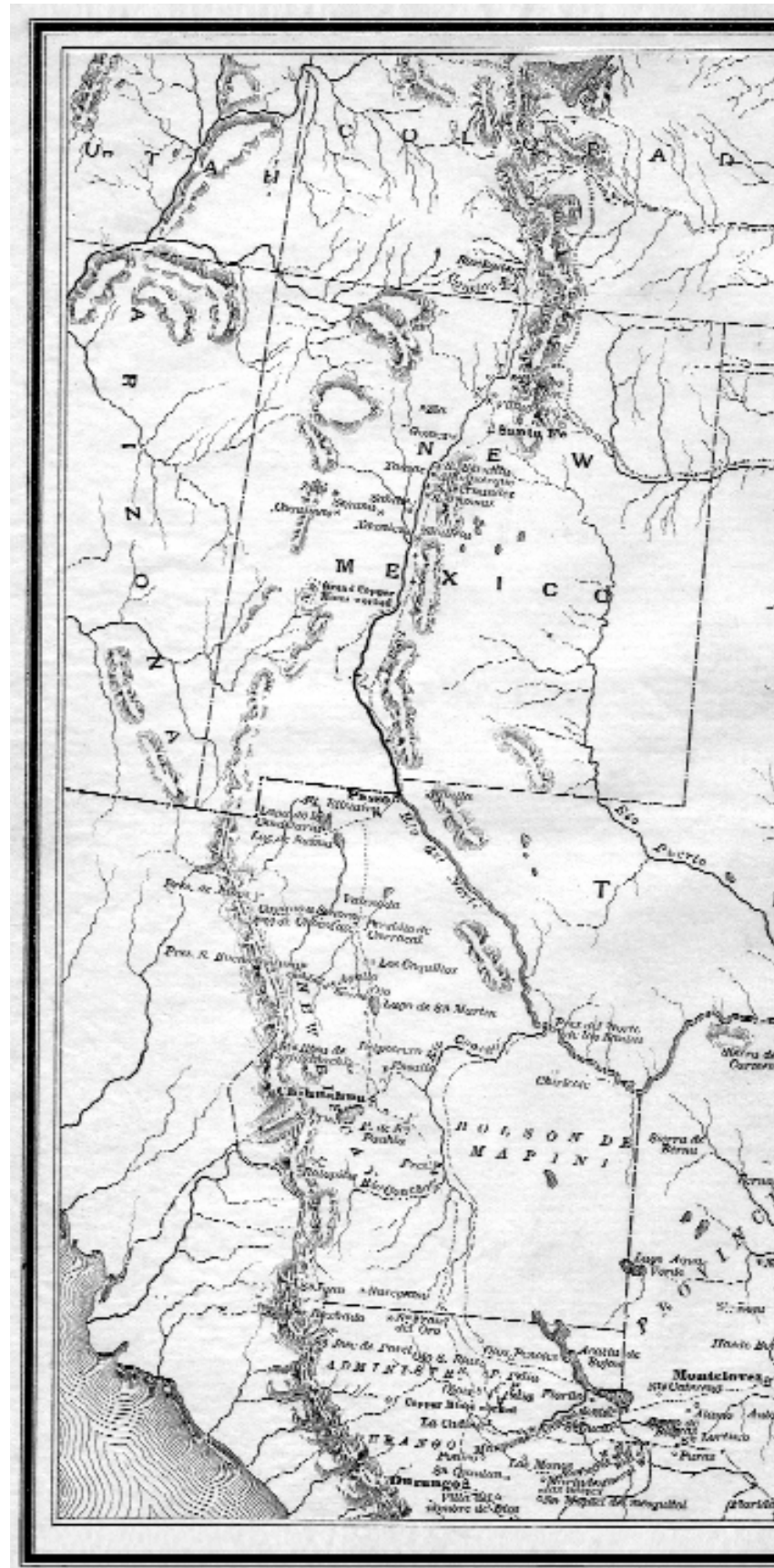
ONE NATION AMONG MANY

The Origins and Objectives of Pike's Southwest Expedition

by Stephen G. Hyslop

The Southwest Expedition of Captain Zebulon Montgomery Pike was a hazardous military reconnaissance into hotly contested territory. Spain claimed much of the country he traversed, including what is now the state of Kansas, and it was occupied by Indians of various nations who cared little for American assertions that President Thomas Jefferson, by virtue of the

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Louisiana Purchase of 1803, was now their Great Father. This complicated Pike's imposing task of exploring the limits of the disputed Louisiana Territory and urging tribes of the region to recognize American authority and be peaceful. After following the Arkansas River to its headwaters in the Rocky Mountains at great pains in late 1806, he and his men were captured by Spanish troops near the upper Rio Grande in February 1807 and taken first to Santa Fe and later to Chihuahua for questioning.

For all the difficulties Pike and company encountered, their journey provided as much impetus for westward expansion as the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Indeed, Pike's pitfalls offered Americans a more instructive view of the obstacles they might face on the way west than the good fortune of Lewis and Clark, who luckily eluded Spanish parties sent to intercept them. As demonstrated by the taxing Southwest Expedition, the fifteen million dollars Jefferson offered for Louisiana served merely as a down payment. To make good on that purchase—to secure for the United States a vast area to which other nations had enduring claims—would cost Americans dearly in years to come.

Pike and his men nearly paid with their lives, but the encouraging results as detailed in his published account lured other Americans across the Plains and deep into Spanish territory. In 1821, when Mexico won independence from Spain, merchant adventurer William Becknell incorporated one promising stretch of the path Pike followed, running westward along the Arkansas River from the Great Bend, into the trade route known as the Santa Fe Trail. If Becknell was the father of that trail, then Pike might be called its grandfather, the man who officially inaugurated a fateful exchange between Spanish and Anglo-Americans that involved both commerce and conflict, leading to the occupation of New Mexico in 1846 by U.S. troops following the Santa Fe Trail.

Pike was a pathfinder, but the paths he found and pursued were not new. He built on the accomplishments of Spanish and French explorers, who were themselves guided by Indians along trails that tribe members had used for ages. In that sense, Pike's historic venture simply was another chapter in a saga that began long before he was born to an army officer and his wife on a farm in New Jersey in 1779, when the outcome of the American Revolution still remained very much in doubt and few people imagined that this struggling young nation would ever span the continent.

Pike's Southwest Expedition grew out of the Louisiana Purchase, which in turn had its roots in a grandiose claim made in 1682 by French explorer René Robert Cavelier, sieur de la Salle.

After paddling down the Mississippi River to its mouth with a party of Frenchmen and Indians in canoes, La Salle took possession for King Louis XIV of the entire country watered by the "Mississippi and all rivers which discharge themselves thereinto."¹ This formed the basis for American assertions that the Louisiana Purchase extended westward to the headwaters of the Mississippi's great tributaries, including the Missouri, Arkansas, and Red Rivers. In fact, King Louis and his successors possessed little of Louisiana other than places settled by French colonists, notably New Orleans and St. Louis. New Orleans alone may have been worth the price Jefferson paid for Louisiana, for control of that port gave Americans free access to the Gulf of Mexico from the Mississippi.

Beyond that, the French controlled Louisiana only to the extent that they had diplomatic and trading ties with tribes along the Missouri River and other western waterways. Among those who traded with the French during the eighteenth century were three tribes that occupied the mixed prairie and woodlands east of the Plains and later figured prominently in Pike's Southwest Expedition: Osages, Kansas, and Pawnees. The Kansas lived near the mouth of the Kansas River, with Pawnees to their north and west (largely in present Nebraska) and Osages to their south and east (largely in present Missouri). All three groups raised corn and other crops and supplemented their harvests by hunting, sometimes ranging far out onto the Plains in pursuit of buffalo and clashing there with rival tribes.

By 1720 the Pawnees had obtained guns from the French in exchange for furs, and they used the firearms in battles with the Apaches on the western Plains. Those Apaches traded with Spanish colonists in New Mexico and alarmed them with fanciful reports that Frenchmen were settling among the Pawnees and arming them for assaults on Spaniards. With Spain and France at war, New Mexico's governor had orders to challenge the French and to "block their evil designs."² In the summer of 1720 he dispatched

1. Marshall Sprague, *So Vast So Beautiful a Land: Louisiana and the Purchase* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1991), 3–4; William H. Goetzmann and Glyndwyr Williams, *The Atlas of North American Exploration: From the Norse Voyages to the Race to the Pole* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1992), 64–65.

2. David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 169–71; Goetzmann and Williams, *The Atlas of North American Exploration*, 94.



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Pedro de Villasur with a force of more than one hundred Spanish soldiers and Pueblo Indian allies to Pawnee country to deal with the presumed French threat.

Villasur's expedition was not the first Spanish venture across the Plains. In 1541 Francisco Vázquez de Coronado had journeyed northeastward from Pueblo country to the Arkansas River and beyond in pursuit of the fabled riches of a land called Quivira. Coronado reaped no profit from that expedition, but it formed the basis for Spanish claims to the Plains. Spaniards had difficulty pursuing those claims, however, because authorities discouraged trading ventures beyond New Mexico and prohibited the sale of guns to Indians. The limits of Spanish power on the Plains became painfully clear when Pawnees ambushed Villasur near the Platte River and killed him and many of his troops.

The defeat of Villasur encouraged the French to extend their chain of tribal alliances westward and seek entry to New Mexico commercially if not militarily. In 1724 Frenchman Étienne Veniard de Bourgmont, commandant of the Missouri River, set out on an expedition that foreshadowed Pike's diplomatic efforts among western tribes. After constructing a French outpost called Fort Orleans on the lower Missouri, Bourgmont proceeded upstream with a mixed force including several dozen Osages and their

chiefs. His goal was to persuade the Osages, Kansas, Pawnees, and other French trading partners to keep peace with each other and with the Apaches to their west.

This ambitious effort to pacify Indians, like later American efforts to do the same, was not a humanitarian gesture. French, Spanish, British, and American authorities all incited tribes to make war when it served their national interests, but peace often was preferable because it allowed traders and officials to move safely and profitably from camp to camp and reach remote groups such as the Apaches. When Bourgmont met with the Kansa tribe in July 1724 he urged them to deal peacefully with the Osages and other Indians accompanying him. "If you quarrel with the other nations who have come with me," he told them, "you will also always quarrel with me."³ Bourgmont prevailed on the Kansas to surrender Apache captives and join in a French expedition that encountered Apaches along the Smoky Hill River (near present Ellsworth). He invited them to a grand peace council and went on to parley with the Apaches along the Arkansas. Although they welcomed his initiative, the Apaches continued to trade with Spaniards as well as Frenchmen until Comanches advancing from the Rockies swept the tribe from the western Plains in the 1730s. Many Apache bands took refuge in mountainous regions of New Mexico, where they became notorious for raiding Spanish settlements.

The emergence of the formidable Comanches did not deter French traders from seeking a path to Santa Fe. In the spring of 1739 brothers Pierre and Paul Mallet formed a small trading party and ventured up the Missouri River in the belief that Santa Fe lay near its headwaters. The Pawnees and other Indians they met with knew better and advised them to head overland to the Arkansas River,

3. William E. Unrau, *The Kansa Indians: A History of the Wind People, 1673–1873* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 61–63; Goetzmann and Williams, *The Atlas of North American Exploration*, 95.

which they followed upstream toward the Rockies before turning southwest and reaching Santa Fe in July. France now was at peace with Spain, and the Mallets were well received in Santa Fe despite an official ban on trade with foreigners. New Mexicans had to pay steep prices for goods imported by traders from Chihuahua and welcomed inroads by foreign merchants offering better terms. The Mallets had lost much if not all of their goods during a river crossing and left Santa Fe in 1740 with little to show for their efforts. But they had demonstrated that New Mexico could be infiltrated from the east. The garrison at Santa Fe, they noted, had only eighty soldiers, "poorly trained and badly armed."⁴ They returned to French territory along the Canadian River (so called, perhaps, for the Canadians of the Mallet party or other French explorers) to the lower Arkansas River.

In years to come, French traders made further ventures to New Mexico. They found that the Comanches, who were emerging as the dominant tribe on the Southern Plains, welcomed trade. But the Comanches did not want traders passing through their territory to bargain with Spaniards or sell guns to rival tribes. The path of least resistance to New Mexico lay to the north of Comanche country, along the Arkansas River, and that would remain the case through the era of American infiltration that Pike inaugurated.

Despite impressive advances west of the Mississippi, the French faced mounting pressure from the British east of that river. The struggle between the two colonial powers climaxed with the French and Indian War, which broke out in 1754 and became part of the Seven Years' War, involving many European nations. Spain entered the contest belatedly as France's ally and earned a momentous reward. In 1762 France transferred New Orleans and all of Louisiana west of the Mississippi to Spain before conceding defeat and surrendering eastern Louisiana and Canada to Britain in 1763.

This transfer posed a huge challenge for Spanish authorities, who had long maintained a defensive posture aimed at keeping foreigners from entering New Mexico and Texas and gaining access to the core of New Spain and its mineral wealth. By necessity, they relied heavily on French officials and traders who remained in Louisiana and served the country's new masters.

4. Goetzmann and Williams, *The Atlas of North American Exploration*, 98–99; George E. Hyde, *The Pawnee Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974), 88–89; Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America*, 196–97.

St. Louis became the base for such savvy French traders as Auguste and Pierre Chouteau who operated under Spanish authority and dealt with Indians formerly allied to the French. Those St. Louis traders faced sharp competition from French Canadians operating under British authority. These were tumultuous times for the Osages, who played one European faction against the other and amassed firearms and other trade goods in exchange for furs and horses. In the process, Osage hunters and warriors ranged far and wide and acquired a host of tribal enemies, including the Kansas and Comanches to their west and the Potowatomis to their east. "This is a nation which will cause trouble for a long time," wrote Auguste Chouteau of the Osages.⁵ But neither he nor his Spanish overseers could afford to alienate them and risk losing control of trade between St. Louis and the Plains.

In 1786 Governor Juan Bautista de Anza of New Mexico arranged a long-lasting peace with large factions of Comanches. Around the same time, a tireless Spanish pathfinder of French origin named Pedro Vial (born Pierre Vial) set out on a series of journeys across the Plains that took him from San Antonio to Santa Fe and from there to St. Louis and back in later years, adding greatly to Spanish knowledge of the region and its tribes and trails. A map he drew of land that "I, Pedro Vial, have traveled over" covered much of the country between the Mississippi and the central Rockies.⁶

Despite such feats, Spanish power was fast declining. The American victory in the Revolutionary War presented Spain with a new challenge from restless Americans who soon began crossing the Mississippi to settle in Louisiana without Spanish permission. Meanwhile, the British remained firmly in control of Canada and continued to undermine Spanish authority west of the Mississippi through illicit trade with Indians. Spain returned Louisiana to France in 1800 as part of a secret agreement that left Spanish authorities temporarily in charge of the territory. Settlers there had no idea Louisiana had changed hands until they learned France had sold it to the United States in 1803.

5. Kristie C. Wolferman, *The Osage in Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 43–44; Gilbert C. Din and A. P. Nasatir, *The Imperial Osages: Spanish-Indian Diplomacy in the Mississippi Valley* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 385–89.

6. Noel M. Loomis and Abraham P. Nasatir, *Pedro Vial and the Roads to Santa Fe* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), map facing 291, 380–84; Goetzmann and Williams, *The Atlas of North American Exploration*, 138–39.

What the United States purchased in 1803 was simply the right to enter the arena and compete for control of the Indian country stretching westward to the Rockies. Into that dangerous arena in 1806 stepped twenty-seven-year-old Zebulon Pike, who would do his best to substantiate his nation's theoretical claim to this greater Louisiana.

Spain denied the validity of the Louisiana Purchase, for France had pledged in 1800 not to transfer Louisiana to a third party without Spain's consent. Under pressure from Napoleon Bonaparte, Spain went along with the transfer of New Orleans, St. Louis, and other settlements to the United States but rejected American claims that Louisiana extended to the headwaters of tributaries of the Mississippi. The terms of the Louisiana Purchase stated that the territory had the same extent in 1803 "that it had when France possessed it" (before transferring it to Spain).⁷ But what had France possessed? Spanish authorities argued that Louisiana was limited to the area of French settlement, which did not extend far west of the Mississippi. To be sure, they were more generous in defining their own territory. They continued to claim possession of the Plains, although Spain had no settlements north of Texas. In fact, no European power had ever held the vast Indian country between the French settlements and New Mexico. Efforts by Europeans to induce members of one tribe or another to acknowledge them as "fathers" did not constitute possession.

What the United States purchased in 1803—beyond New Orleans, St. Louis, and other settled areas owned by France—was simply the right to enter the arena and compete for control of the Indian country stretching westward to the Rockies. Into that dangerous arena in 1806 stepped twenty-seven-year-old Zebulon Pike, who would do his best to substantiate his nation's theoretical claim to this greater Louisiana.

Before embarking on the Southwest Expedition, Pike led a military reconnaissance of the upper Mississippi River to explore the region, engage in parleys with Indians, and warn British traders not to intrude on territory claimed by the United States. Departing St. Louis in August 1805, Pike and his men reached Cass Lake in what is now Minnesota that



winter, not far from the source of the Mississippi, and returned to St. Louis in April 1806. The hard winter in Minnesota portended greater trials to come for Pike and his soldiers, many of whom joined him on the Southwest Expedition. "Although they are a Dam'd set of Rascals," Pike wrote, "yet in the Woods they are staunch fellows and very proper for such expeditions as I am engaged in."⁸

The two expeditions Pike led were prestigious assignments, and he owed them in part to the fact that he was well connected. His father, Major Zebulon Pike, had served during the Revolutionary War under James Wilkinson, who went on to become commanding general of the army and governor of Upper Louisiana (embracing St. Louis and environs). Young Lieutenant Pike became his protégé, and that proved to be both a blessing and a curse, for Wilkinson was as controversial as he was powerful. It had long been rumored that he was involved in intrigue with Spanish officials, and in fact, he was paid to spy for them. In 1804 he had informed on Lewis and Clark, urging that Spanish troops "intercept Captain Lewis and his party,

7. Donald Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains: Exploring the West from Monticello* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 105; Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America*, 291–93.

8. Donald Jackson, ed., *The Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike, with Letters and Related Documents*, 2 vols. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), 2:114. This is the definitive source for Pike's Southwest Expedition, and my account is based largely on Donald Jackson's findings as editor, author, and interpreter of the expedition.



Revolutionary War general James Wilkinson, who authorized Pike's Southwest Expedition, became publicly linked to scandal and foul play in the Burr Conspiracy. No evidence indicates Pike knew of Wilkinson's alleged schemes.

who are on the Missouri River, and force them to retire or take them prisoners.”⁹

Proof of Wilkinson's treachery did not surface until long after his death in 1825. Shortly after Pike left on his Southwest Expedition in July 1806, however, Wilkinson was linked publicly to the so-called Burr Conspiracy, a tangled plot whose objectives remain unclear. Wilkinson testified against Aaron Burr, who was accused of treason, or plotting to wage war against the United States and seize American territory along the Mississippi. Although Burr was acquitted, the scandal further tarnished his reputation and that of Wilkinson, who had been scheming with Burr long before he accused him of foul play. Burr may have had designs on Spanish territory, and Wilkinson may have conspired with him to that end before turning on him.

No evidence indicates that Pike knew of Wilkinson's machinations with Burr, or that the Southwest Expedition was related to the Burr Conspiracy. Pike's assignment was consistent with Wilkinson's official duties, and President Jefferson was duly informed of the reconnaissance. Exploring Louisiana to its western limits was among the nation's highest priorities, and recent developments lent urgency to that task. Tensions were rising along the disputed Texas–Louisiana border. Should war break out, and should it “be judged expedient to take possession of New Mexico,” as Wilkinson wrote in a letter to Secretary of War Henry Dearborn in September 1805, the Arkansas River

route that Pike would explore in part offered a possible avenue of invasion.¹⁰ Dearborn replied that he thought such a campaign would be practicable and added, “I am not sure that a project of that kind may not become necessary.”¹¹

Reconnoitering a path that might be used in the event of war was just one facet of Pike's expedition. Both sides hoped to avoid conflict, and in late 1806 Wilkinson reached a settlement that defused the situation and met with Jefferson's approval. The orders Wilkinson issued to Pike earlier that year on June 24 defined the forthcoming expedition as one concerned primarily with Indian diplomacy and secondarily with exploring the upper reaches of the Arkansas and Red Rivers without igniting hostilities with Spain. Pike's first task was to escort fifty-one Osage captives who had been ransomed from rival Potowatomis to their home villages in what is now western Missouri along with some Osage and Pawnee envoys who recently had visited Washington, D.C. Having secured the cooperation of Osage chiefs, Pike was then to arrange “a permanent peace between the Canzes [Kansas] & Osage Nations.”¹²

That was a tall order, given the recent hostilities between those two tribes, but Pike's diplomatic challenge did not end there. He was to proceed to the country of the Pawnees, Wilkinson ordered, and seek their assistance in bringing the formidable Comanches to terms: “you will endeavour to make peace between that distant powerfull nation and the nations which inhabit the Country between us and them, particularly the Osage.” Bourgmont had pursued a similar peace in 1724, but this one proved far more difficult since the tribes in question knew little of Americans and their intentions. Wilkinson's audacious plan for a Pax Americana that included Comanches could have placed Pike's small party at great risk had they encountered pro-Spanish Comanches in force.

9. Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 153.

10. Jackson, *The Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike*, 2:101.

11. Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 249.

12. Jackson, *The Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike*, 1:285.

After laying out this plan, Wilkinson invited Pike to explore the southwestern limits of the Louisiana Purchase in strangely casual terms:

As your Interview with the Cammanchees will probably lead you to the Head Branches of the Arkansaw, and Red Rivers you may find yourself approximate to the settlements of New Mexico, and therefore it will be necessary you should move with great circumspection, to keep clear of any Hunting or reconnoitring parties from that province, & to prevent alarm or offence because the affairs of Spain, & the United States appear to be on the point of amicable adjustment.”¹³

This passage may have been designed to reassure Spanish officials if they captured Pike and examined his orders. Pike understood that reaching the headwaters of the Arkansas and Red Rivers—which meant probing the limits of the American claim in defiance of Spain—was not a contingency but his ultimate objective and a matter of great interest to his superiors. He was to ascend the Arkansas to its source, then locate the headwaters of the Red River and follow it downstream to Natchitoches (in what is now Louisiana) without neglecting his daunting diplomatic task. As Wilkinson put it blithely, “you, yourself may descend the Red River accompanied by a party of the most respectable Cammanches to the post of Natchitoches and there receive further orders from me.”

Beyond that, Pike was to serve as a naturalist and geographer during the journey, using instruments that included a telescope, compass, and sextant and gauging the distance his party covered by keeping a steady pace and timing the march. “In the course of your tour,” Wilkinson instructed him, “you are to remark particularly upon the Geographical structure; the Natural History; and population; of the country through which you may pass.”¹⁴ Many of Pike’s papers were confiscated when he was taken prisoner, but he retained possession of his “journal in full” and kept notes furtively in captivity.¹⁵ He later drew on those written records and on his memory to compose a detailed account of the expedition that added considerably to American knowledge of the country he traversed when it was published in 1810 and made this military reconnaissance highly instructive to the public at large.

On July 15, 1806, Pike and his party left St. Louis with the Osages they were escorting to their villages and a few Pawnees (with whom Osages maintained better relations than with Kansas). Twenty-three men accompanied Pike as members of his party, including Dr. John Hamilton Robinson, who shared Wilkinson’s penchant for intrigue and schemed in later years to seize Spanish territory; interpreter Antoine François “Baronet” Vásquez, whose father was Spanish and whose mother was French; and Lieutenant James B. Wilkinson, the general’s son. One sergeant, two corporals, sixteen privates—one of whom deserted soon after they set out—and a volunteer who went as far as Osage territory before turning back made up the rest of Pike’s party. They wore lightweight, summer uniforms and expected to complete the expedition by late fall—a gross miscalculation based on ignorance of how distant the headwaters of the Arkansas and Red Rivers were and how time consuming Pike’s efforts to treat with Indians would be.

It took them a month to reach the Osage villages, employing two keelboats fitted with sails that made slow progress up the Missouri to the Osage River. The sails offered little help against the current, and the boats had to be rowed, poled, or towed by men struggling along the riverbank with rope in hand. Some who were not tasked with propelling the boats preferred to walk. Continuing up the Osage River, Pike entered Osage territory in mid-August. The freed captives accompanying him had a joyful reunion with their kin, during which a chief named Sans Oreilles (No Ears) delivered a speech highly flattering to Americans: “Osage, you now see your wives, your brothers, your daughters, your sons, redeemed from captivity. Who did this? was it the Spaniards? No. The French? No. Had either of those people been governors of the country, your relatives might have rotted in captivity, and you never would have seen them; but the Americans stretched forth their hands, and they are returned to you!!”¹⁶

This speech may well have evolved somewhat as it was passed along in translation and set down in writing by the zealously patriotic Pike. Certainly, the Osages expressed gratitude for favors done, but Americans had by no means solved the vexing problems that their French and Spanish predecessors confronted in dealing with these Indians. They had long been divided into two camps, the Little Os-

13. Ibid., 1:286.

14. Ibid., 1:286, 287.

15. Ibid., 2:238–41.

16. Ibid., 1:304.



Twenty-three men accompanied Pike as members of his party, including Dr. John Hamilton Robinson (left), who shared Wilkinson's penchant for intrigue and schemed in later years to seize Spanish territory; interpreter Antoine François "Baronet" Vásquez; and Lieutenant James B. Wilkinson, the general's son.

ages and the Big (or Grand) Osages, and a band of Big Osages recently had broken away and settled along the lower Arkansas River. That factionalism complicated diplomatic efforts, as did the militancy of the Osages, who attacked rival tribes and raided white settlements for reasons both material and spiritual. Pike told of being awakened regularly by the cries of Osages mourning those recently departed or long dead. Grieving warriors, he added, sang a song that went something like this: "Our enemies have slain my father (or mother); he is lost to me and his family; I pray to you, O Master of Life! to preserve me until I revenge his death, and then do with me as thou pleaseth."¹⁷

Peace proved difficult to impose on people who considered making war a sacred duty. Yet Pike doggedly persisted, persuading an Osage delegation that included prominent men, and a few of their wives, to accompany him to a council with Kansas and Pawnees. He also purchased horses, for he and his party were leaving the boats behind and moving overland. They set out with a number of Osages and three Pawnees on September 1. Three days later, as they passed through idyllic country in eastern Kansas ("Nature scarcely ever formed a more beautiful place for a farm," he wrote), he learned to his annoyance that some of the Osages "had been *dreaming* and wished to

return." In following their dreams, which they considered prophetic, Indians often acted more shrewdly than skeptics like Pike realized. On September 5 all the Little Osages in the delegation, including Sans Oreilles, who had spoken so highly of Americans, decided to return to their villages. Perhaps they concluded that the dream Pike pursued was too dangerous. He suffered further defections in days to come.¹⁸

Osages who remained with him as guides avoided the territory of rival Kansas to the north and led the Americans on a wide arc to the northwest that brought them to a Pawnee village on the Republican River southwest of present Guide Rock, Nebraska. Along the way they passed through the Flint Hills and brought down some buffalo. The Kansas hunted here, the Osages said, and "therefore they would destroy all the game they possibly could." On September 13 a Pawnee accompanying Pike went ahead to the village with Dr. Robinson to prepare people there for the Americans' arrival. The main party followed at a slower pace, delayed on September 19 by heavy rain that kept them in camp. As Pike related, "we employed ourselves in reading the Bible, Pope's Essays, and in pricking on our arms with India ink *some characters*, which will frequently bring to mind our forlorn and dreary situation, as well as the happiest days of our life."¹⁹

Two days later, as they neared the Republican River, an Osage woman informed Pike that her husband and another man "were conspiring to desert us in the night and steal some of our horses." Pike foiled this alleged plot but concluded that Osages, with few exceptions, were "a faithless set of poltrons, incapable of a great and generous action." The Osages, for their part, remained unconvinced that Americans were as great as Pike proclaimed them to be. He had few Osages still with him, and no chiefs of any conse-

17. *Ibid.*, 1:295.

18. *Ibid.*, 1:314.

19. *Ibid.*, 1:317, 319.

quence, when he reached the Pawnee village. To make matters worse, he learned that these Pawnees recently had been visited by a party of several hundred Spanish troops. That impressive force, led by Lieutenant Facundo Melgares, made Pike's party look puny by comparison. Melgares had distributed gifts and medals to Pawnees to encourage them to trust in "their father, his most Catholic majesty," and spurn American advances.²⁰

Neither Spaniards nor Americans had yet made as deep an impression on Pawnees as their French trading partners had over the years. Pike noted that two French traders arrived at the village while he was there, bringing word that Lewis and Clark had returned safely from the Pacific Northwest, news that "diffused general joy through our party." Lieutenant Wilkinson, in his report, observed that Sharitarish (White Wolf), the principal chief of this Pawnee band (known as the Kitkehahkis), greeted the Americans in French with a hearty "*Bon jour*."²¹

Schooled by their experience with the French, the Pawnees here dealt shrewdly with Spanish and American overtures, accepting gifts and assurances from both parties without committing themselves. When Pike met with them in council on September 29 and demanded that a Spanish flag they displayed be replaced by an American one ("it was impossible for the nation to have two fathers," he insisted), they complied. But Sharitarish later informed Pike that he would not side with either nation. In his view, Americans and Spaniards were like feuding brothers and he was the wise father, trying to keep them apart and maintain peace. Spanish forces had returned to their country at his urging, he told Pike, and the Americans must do the same, "or he must stop us by force of arms." Pike replied heatedly that warriors sent by the "*great American father were not women* to be turned back by words."²² Sharitarish, recalling this confrontation in later years, described Pike as a "brave young chief" to whom he offered fatherly advice: "I respect you—I love you as my son . . . do not oblige me to hurt you my son, you must not, you cannot pass that way." In the end, Sharitarish let Pike proceed unmolested but showed no signs of deferring to Americans or helping them negotiate with the Comanches, who were at war with Pawnees.²³

Pike's diplomatic efforts were not entirely in vain. When he reached the Pawnee village he arranged for the Kansas present to sit down with his small Osage delegation and "smoke of the pipe of peace." Pike doubted that the ceremony would do much good, since "none of the principal men of either nation were present." Yet tensions between the Kansas and Osages eased around this time, and their council with Pike may have helped reconcile them. That did not make them compliant children of the "great American father," however, and they had their differences with American traders and settlers in years to come.²⁴

Pike now had little hope of fulfilling Wilkinson's plan for a grand tribal alliance and turned his attention to seeking the headwaters of the Arkansas and Red Rivers—an urgent task as winter neared. He and his men did not leave the Pawnee village until October 7. They followed what they called the "Spanish trace" (the path trod by troops under Melgares as they returned to New Mexico) and reached the Great Bend of the Arkansas on October 18. There, as planned, Lieutenant Wilkinson and five soldiers separated from Pike's party and went downriver in canoes to reconnoiter the lower Arkansas. By the time they set out on October 28, Wilkinson reported, "the river was almost choaked with drifting ice," and they made painfully slow progress.²⁵ Not until January did they reach the Arkansas Post, near the mouth of the river.

Pike retained fifteen men after Wilkinson departed and resumed his march on October 29, following the Arkansas upstream toward the Rockies. Wildlife abounded, and Pike made note of many edible species, including prairie dogs (which he found "excellent meat, after they were exposed a night or two to the frost, by which means the rankness acquired by their subterraneous dwelling is corrected"), deer, elk, cabrie (pronghorns), wild horses, and buffalo in profusion ("the face of the earth appeared to be covered with them"). Pike's account suggested that travelers across the Plains could subsist largely on game they hunted, but the supply was not limitless. On November 11, near what is now the Kansas–Colorado border, his party "passed a Spanish camp where it appeared they remained some days as we conjectured to lay up meat . . . as the buffalo evidently began to grow much less numerous."²⁶

20. *Ibid.*, 1:320, 323–24.

21. *Ibid.*, 1:330, 2:6.

22. *Ibid.*, 1:328, 1:329–30.

23. *Ibid.*, 2:373–74; Hyde, *The Pawnee Indians*, 149–55.

24. Jackson, *The Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike*, 1:328, 2:150; Unrau, *Kansa Indians*, 83–86.

25. Jackson, *The Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike*, 2:9–19.

26. *Ibid.*, 1:339–343, 1:344.



On November 16, 1806, Pike and his men first glimpsed the Rockies. He and a few companions tried unsuccessfully to climb the mountain known today as Pikes Peak.

Four days later Pike and his men glimpsed the Rockies in the distance and “gave three *cheers* to the *Mexican mountains*. . . . They appear to present a natural boundary between the province of Louisiana and New Mexico.” Pike’s venture would carry him across that boundary, raising suspicions that his primary mission, conveyed to him secretly by Wilkinson, was to spy on New Mexico. But if that was his objective, he could have spared his party much time and trouble by leaving the Arkansas here and heading off to the southwest. He saw signs that Spanish troops, perhaps those under Melgares, had done just that by following a “fork on the south side,” the Purgatoire River, upstream (toward Raton Pass).²⁷ Pike’s knowledge of the region was sketchy, but he carried a rough map drawn from information provided by traders. It showed correctly that if Pike continued up the Arkansas to its headwaters, he would move northwest, away from “St. Affee.”²⁸ And so he did, in keeping with his orders.

On November 23, after a confrontation with Pawnees who demanded more from Pike in tribute than he was willing to give, he and his men reached the confluence of the Arkansas River and Fountain Creek (in present Pueblo, Colorado). The Arkansas now “appeared to be dividing itself into many small branches,” and Pike formed a detachment to survey the surrounding country while the rest of his men took shelter in a log breastwork. He hoped to climb the mountain known today as Pikes Peak to gain a

commanding view of the Arkansas and its branches but turned back after ascending a smaller mountain near that peak and realizing it was insurmountable in winter. His men had “light overalls on, and no stockings,” and game was scarce. But after returning to camp with his detachment, he continued with his entire party up the Arkansas in heavy snow and bitter cold, reaching the mouth of the Royal Gorge in early December.²⁹

At that point, Pike lost his way. He did not believe the narrow river streaming from the gorge was the main branch of the Arkansas and instead pursued a tributary, Four Mile Creek, which looked more promising but led his party astray. In an excruciating month-long loop to the north, they reached the headwaters of the South Platte River and later came upon what Pike thought was the source of the Red River until they followed it downstream and arrived back at the Royal Gorge. They were on the Arkansas and had come full circle. “This was a great mortification,” Pike wrote, “but at the same time I consoled myself with the knowledge I had acquired of the source of the La Platte and Arkansaw rivers.” That must have been small consolation for his long-suffering men. Even Pike, who saw glory in this grueling exploration, was appalled to learn that it was only half finished. He realized he had yet to reach the Red River on January 5, 1807, his twenty-eighth birthday. “Most fervently did I hope never to spend another so miserably,” he wrote.³⁰

27. *Ibid.*, 1:345–46.

28. *Ibid.*, 1:455–59, plate 60.

29. *Ibid.*, 1:349, 351, 354.

30. *Ibid.*, 1:365, 366; Donald Jackson, “How Lost Was Zebulon Pike?” *American Heritage* 16 (February 1965): 10–15, 75–80.

Leaving two men behind to guard the baggage and tired horses, Pike and the rest departed the Arkansas in mid-January and trudged south in pursuit of the Red River, which he believed originated north of Santa Fe. His party was further diminished a week later when two soldiers were crippled by frostbite and could no longer walk. Promising to send relief as soon as possible, Pike left them with food and ammunition and descended from the mountains into the San Luis Valley with his remaining able-bodied men. By month's end they had reached what Pike took for the Red River but proved to be the Rio Grande. He knew they were perilously close to the settlements of New Mexico and might soon be challenged by Spanish troops.


In early February they built a stockade along the Conejos River, a tributary of the Rio Grande, and Dr. Robinson departed for Santa Fe to gather intelligence. He was soon captured, and a sizable force of Spanish troops went in pursuit of his party. In late February they reached the stockade, and their commander informed Pike of his position along the Rio Grande. Pike immediately ordered the American flag lowered in recognition that he had entered Spanish territory. He had recently sent men to retrieve those left behind in the mountains and did not want to surrender until all had returned. But the Spanish commander insisted that his presence was required in Santa Fe and assured him that any men left behind would be safely conducted to the capital. The soldiers with Pike were hungry, ragged, and “fearful of treachery,” he wrote, but Spanish troops allayed their fears by giving them food and blankets.³¹

Pike and six of his men reached Santa Fe as prisoners on March 2 (he lost track and mistakenly placed his arrival there on March 3 in his published account). Summoned to appear before Governor Joaquín del Real Alencaster, Pike spoke with him in French, a language they shared. “You come to reconnoitre our country, do you?” Alencaster asked pointedly. To which Pike responded: “I marched to reconnoitre our own.”⁴³ Both men were asserting what they believed to be legitimate claims to the disputed territory Pike traversed. After inspecting Pike’s orders from Wilkinson, Alencaster concluded that he was a “man of honor,” pursuing his assigned task, but sent him under guard to

Chihuahua to be interrogated further by Nemesio Salcedo, commandant general of the Internal Provinces (along the northern frontier of New Spain).³²

Pike did not set out to reconnoiter Spanish territory, but his enforced journey to Chihuahua allowed him to do so. Escorting him was Lieutenant Melgares, who had been Pike’s adversary on the Plains but treated him now like an honored guest, arranging a fandango for him at one point. The hospitality of New Mexicans to foreigners and their hunger for affordable trade goods—they paid twenty dollars or more a yard for fine cloth imported from the south—were later detailed by Pike in print and served as incentives for Americans who traveled there in years to come. A few traders ventured from St. Louis to Santa Fe before Pike published his findings, but his account of his journey with Melgares down the Chihuahua Trail, which linked Santa Fe to the larger and wealthier town of Chihuahua, added to the allure of the region for enterprising Americans.

After Pike reached Chihuahua in early April, Salcedo questioned him and detained him there until the end of the month, when he and several others were released and escorted back to American territory through Texas. Pike’s return to the United States in July 1807 was less than triumphant. Five of his men remained confined in Chihuahua for two years. (Another soldier, William Meek, was held until 1820 after killing his comrade, Theodore Miller, in a prison brawl.) Furthermore, the scandal surrounding Burr and Wilkinson raised suspicions about Pike and the purpose of his expedition.

Pike defended his reputation and died a hero, leading troops into battle against the British as a brigadier general in 1813. But doubts about his motives and accomplishments later resurfaced. In recent times his Southwest Expedition has received little public attention compared with the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Both were momentous undertakings with far-reaching consequences. Sooner or later, all those Pike dealt with on his epic journey—Osages, Kansas, Pawnees, and New Mexicans—would feel the relentless pressure of American expansionism, a force he embodied by reaching to the limits of the territory his nation claimed and beyond. 

31. Jackson, *The Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike*, 1:384–85.

32. *Ibid.*, 1:392, 394; 2:168 (this fragmentary journal confiscated from Pike shows that the account he published was off by a day here), 193–95 (Alencaster places Pike’s arrival on March 2).